

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-FIVE)

“RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUR MIND”

EPHESIANS 4:20-24

20 But ye have not so learned Christ;

21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

The **Message** translates the passage in the following way: “*But that’s no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you.*”

The American theologian and author, **Steven J. Cole**, made the following comments in respect of **Ephesians 4:20-24**, the passage we have just read:

"When it comes to the subject of changing our lives, we all feel the same as we feel about going to heaven: We're all for it, but we'd rather not go through what you have to go through to get there! The idea of change sounds good, but when it gets right down to it, we think, 'You mean I actually have to live differently? No way!'

But the Christian life is fundamentally a changed life. If you claim to believe in Christ, but are living just as you did before you believed in Him, you need to examine whether you truly believe in Him. Becoming a Christian requires turning from your sin to God. But repentance is not a one-time event. It defines the lifestyle of a believer. God changes us radically at the moment of salvation by imparting new life to us, but this is followed by a life-time of changing into the image of Jesus Christ (**2 Corinthians 3:18**).

In **Ephesians 4:17-19**, Paul paints a grim portrait of how unbelievers live. While not all unbelievers are as bad as they possibly could be, they all live *'in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart'* (**Ephesians 4:17- 18**). That bleak picture describes each of us before we met Jesus Christ.

But now [in] **Ephesians 4:20**, Paul draws a sharp contrast: *'But you did not learn Christ in this way.'* He gives us a brief sketch of the changed life that every believer should be experiencing. He's saying: 'The changed life stems from the transformation that God works in us through the gospel as we put off the old life, are renewed in our minds, and put on the new life in Christ.'

First, Paul shows the changes that God works in us through the gospel (**Ephesians 4:20-21**) and then he shows us how the process of changes works in our ongoing experience (**Ephesians 4:22-24**)."

Brothers and sisters, the changes that God works in us begins with us coming to know Jesus Christ personally. Paul describes this process in four ways in **Ephesians 4:20-21**. He writes, "*But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus.*"

According to Paul, the changed life begins when we "***learn Christ,***" "***hear Christ,***" are "***taught by Christ,***" and know "***the truth as it is in Jesus.***"

To "***learn Christ***" means knowing Him personally. It is possible for us to know all of the biblical facts **about** Christ and yet not know Him! In **John 17:1-3**, we read the following:

1 These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee:

2 As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.

3 And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

Our Lord prayed, "*This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*"

The Christian life begins when we receive eternal life from God through faith in Jesus Christ. At that moment, we come to know Him personally. It is true that this initial encounter is only the beginning of our eternal relationship with Him, but, if we have not entered into that personal relationship with Christ, we are not Christians at all!

To “*hear Christ,*” means that when we heard the message of the Gospel, it was as though Jesus Christ Himself was speaking to us! God opened our “spiritual” ears—the “ears of our heart.” We did not merely hear the voice of the preacher, but we heard the voice of our Lord, and it was **His** voice that made the difference!

The same is true in respect of our being “*taught by Christ.*” Paul does not say “You have been taught **about** Christ;” He says, “You have been taught **by** Christ!” It was **Christ** Himself that the Ephesian believers had heard, and it was **by Christ** Himself that they had been taught. Paul is certainly not implying that they had seen and heard Jesus Christ in person. But they had heard Him and been taught by Him through Paul and his colleagues. Paul is implying that Christ Himself speaks in those who faithfully proclaim the truth concerning Him.

The phrase, “*by Him,*” is the translation of the Greek **en autos** which literally means “**in Him!**” The underlying idea is that of union with Christ. It was in fellowship with Christ that the Ephesian believers had been taught. The phrase “*in Christ*” sums up Paul’s view of what it means to be a Christian. Believers are “*faithful in Christ Jesus*” (**Ephesians 1:1**). We have received “*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” (**Ephesians 1:3**). God chose us “*in Him before the foundation of the world*” (**Ephesians 1:4**). “*In Him*” we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins” (**Ephesians 1:7**). “*In whom [Christ]...we have obtained an inheritance*” (**Ephesians 1:11**). “*In whom [Christ]... we have been sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise*” (**Ephesians 1:13**). God’s surpassing power towards us was revealed “*in Christ when He raised Him from the dead*” (**Ephesians 1:20**).

These are references to believers being “*in Christ*” in chapter 1 alone! So, to be “*taught in Him,*” means to be taught from the standpoint of this new relationship with Christ that involves this new position in Christ. Before we were saved, we were positioned **outside** of Christ. We had nothing in common with Him. We did not understand the things of

God. We had no desire for Him. But now, because of God’s mercy and kindness toward us “in Christ,” we are positioned “in Him” for all of time and eternity.

To be “*taught in Him*” is a lifelong process that begins at the moment of salvation, and continues, I believe, throughout eternity! Jesus Christ is the centre of all of Scripture. To be taught in Him therefore, is to grow to know the glory of Christ in His person, His offices, and His work on our behalf. Someday when we see Him as He is, we will be changed to be like Him (**1John 3:2**). Until then, we must continually be engaged in the process of being “taught in Him.”

The phrase, ““*the truth as it is in Jesus,*” qualifies the preceding comments about learning Christ, hearing Him, and being taught by or in Him. The reason that Christ is the focus of instruction is that He is the embodiment of truth according to **John 14:6**. The truth of salvation is only to be found in Jesus Christ. In Him, we learn the truth about who we are, the truth about sin and righteousness, and the truth about God’s purpose for us on this earth. In Him, we learn the truth about how to love God and how to love one another. We learn the truth about the coming judgment, and about heaven and hell. All of the truth that we need for life and godliness centers in the person of Jesus Christ.

Verse **22** informs us that the changed life requires us to “*put off...the old man.*” The term, “*the old man,*” refers to the unsaved person, spiritually dead, totally dominated and controlled by the fallen, unregenerate adamic nature, or the **flesh**. It is a reference to all that we were as sons of Adam prior to our conversion. Paul exhorts us to “*put off,*” the **old man**. Since, as believers, we are no longer positioned “in Adam,” we must stop living as if we still were. We must order our lives to reflect the fact that we are now positioned “in Christ.”

The changed life not only requires us to “*put off...the old man,*” it also requires that the spirit of our minds be renewed. In verse **23** Paul writes, “*And be renewed in the spirit of your mind.*”

The word “*renewed*” is a translation of a Greek word which means, “to be renewed, to be renovated by **inward** transformation.” The Greek word translated “*mind*” is **nous**: (**nooce**), which refers to the seat of understanding, or the thinking faculty. It is the mind as the organ of mental perception and apprehension, the organ of conscious life, and the organ of the consciousness preceding actions and of critically assessing them.

Paul is urging believers to allow the Holy Spirit to continually renew their thought processes. This renewal has reference not only to what we believe, but to that belief effectively transforming our feelings, our attitudes and our behaviour. Paul desires that we all partake of this miracle of a renewed mind which enables us to have a divine perspective on everything. This renewal points to a complete transformation in the believer’s thinking, a change from mental impurity to holiness. The idea is of the increasing influence of the Holy Spirit over the believer’s thought processes so that he or she increasingly sees everything from God’s viewpoint.

The renewal mentioned here is not that of the mind itself in its natural powers of memory, judgment and perception, but the “*spirit*” of the mind, which, when it is surrendered to the controlling power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, is predisposed and energized to seek communion with God, find its greatest delight in Him, and thus fulfill His will.

It has been eloquently and correctly stated that “When a person is converted the **organism** of the mind remains as it was prior to his or her conversion. But the **spirit** of the mind—that part of the mind, which distinguishes human beings from the inferior animals; the part of the mind that makes them capable of interacting with God, is being renewed.

The memory, for example, still exercises its former functions, but it does so on a very different class of subjects; the judgment still discharges its office, but it is occupied with a new set of themes and

ideas; love, retains all its passion, but it attaches itself to objects quite in contrast with those of its earlier preference and pursuit."

The words "*be renewed*" are in the present tense in the Greek, which indicates that the spirit of the mind is continually being renewed. This renewal is an ongoing process that God performs in us as we cooperate with the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does the renewing as we obey Him by saturating our minds with God's transforming Word of truth and applying it to our lives.

Brothers and sisters, it is very important for us to understand that while it is the Holy Spirit who performs the work of renewal in us, we are responsible to use the means of renewal, namely, God's Word, which renews our hearts and thoughts as we submit to it. It is God's desire that our way of thinking be in harmony with His, and His way of thinking is revealed in His Word.

Genuine biblical change is impossible if our minds are not critically engaged. In the past, we relied on dramatic settings, scare tactics, and other gimmicks, to appeal to the emotions of persons, both saved and unsaved. We entertained and enticed and cajoled and pressured them, with all kinds of unbiblical promises and devices, to come to an altar and make a decision for Jesus. But our great error was a failure to appreciate the folly of bypassing the mind. We did not understand that decisions, made on the basis of emotion, do not last. God reasons with us through the truths of His Word. He says to us, "*Come now, and let us reason together.*" The doctrines of Scripture make sense, because they are God's truth. When the Spirit of God opens a person's mind to the truths revealed in the Word, the truth will result not only in changed emotions but also in changed affections and a changed will. Any change that bypasses the spirit of the mind will not last!

Paul does not tell the believers in Ephesus to simply get rid of bad attitudes and habits and develop new, good attitudes and habits. Paul knows that Christianity is not a School for moral self-improvement. Christianity is not a School where believers are taught how to work hard

to change themselves. That is the school of **legalism**, not the school of **grace**.

John Piper comments that, "In the school of Christ change comes...by grace through faith, so that the schoolmaster gets all the glory not the students....In the school of legalism, where you take moral self-improvement courses, you are given the assignment to make a new set of moral clothes and put them on. But in the school of grace your new clothes are created! God creates the new person that we must put on..

This is totally unlike any other school in the world. I am given the assignment to become holy; but then I am told that God creates my holiness. This is a very strange school. Look at **Ephesians 2:10** for one of the strangest sentences of all in the course description: *'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.'*

This boggles the mind! I am God's workmanship, God's creation. And not only that, the works that I am assigned to do—he has already prepared those, too! Who is working in this school, anyway?!

Do you see why Paul can't just say, 'OK, you're a Christian now, get rid of your bad habits and get some good ones.' That is the curriculum in the school of legalism: God saved you, now improve yourself. No! In the school of grace God creates the new person—and that includes all the new attitudes and emotions and practices that we are supposed to put on."

It is very unfortunate that some believers and even some ministers of the Gospel, minimize the significance of the mind, because the Bible emphasizes its importance. According to **Romans 12:1-2**, God renews our lives by renewing our minds, The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows:

1 And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.

2 Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

God sanctifies our minds, or makes us holy through His truth. This truth is His Word. The **New Living Translation** translates **John 17:17** as follows: “*Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.*”

The devil desires to attack the minds of believers, because the mind is that part of the image of God where God communicates with us and reveals His will to us. If the devil can get us to believe a lie, then he has got his nose into the “control centre” and if we do not use the Sword of the Spirit—the Word of God to cause him to leave hastily, he will press his way in until he has gained control of our minds.

We must be “*renewed in the spirit of [our] mind.*” **Conversion is a crisis that leads to a process.** Through Christ, once and for all, we have been given a new position in His new creation, but day-by-day, we must appropriate what He has given to us by faith. The Word of God renews the mind as we surrender to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit. As our mind understands the truth of God’s Word, it is gradually transformed by the Spirit, and this mental renewal and transformation leads to a changed life.

Brothers and sisters, the bridge that leads from putting off of the **old man** in verse **22**, to the putting on of the **new man** in verse **24**, is the renewing of the spirit of the mind in verse **23**. The renewing of the spirit of the mind is the key to all the assignments in the school of grace! If our thoughts, words and actions are the products of the spirit of a

renewed mind, they will be ours in one sense, but in a deeper sense they will be the creation of God in righteousness and true holiness. The **New Living Translation** renders **1 Corinthians 15:10** as follows: “*But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me—and not without results. For I have worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace.*” What Paul is saying in effect here is, “I did my assignments to the best of my ability but really it was God who did my assignments in me and through me!”

In closing, we will consider 4 passages of Scripture which emphasize the power of the Word of God, to renew the spirit of our minds and thus to transform our attitudes and conduct.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

16 That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day.

17 For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!

18 So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.

Colossians 3:1-4

1 Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand.

2 Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.

3 For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

4 And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

Paul is exhorting believers in these two passages to allow their minds to be filled with the truth of heaven so that they will develop a heavenly perspective.

Ephesians 1:18-20

18 I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.

19 I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power

20 that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms.

Paul prays for the hearts of the believers to be *that your hearts will be “flooded with light”* because he knows that it is truth of God’s power and promises that renews the spirit of the mind.

Ephesians 3:18-19

18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Brothers and sisters, when our mind is filled with the love of Christ and with all the fullness of God, then the spirit of our mind is renewed and freed from the deceit of the world. And out of that renewed mind come new attitudes and emotions and practices, and they clothe us with righteousness and holiness. And this new person that we become is indeed the creation of God himself, and to him belongs all the glory forever.